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## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# Leaks And Stories

By Flora Lewis

PARIS, March 13 — The press is not just reporting but making news again. It is always uncomfortable when gamekeeper and poacher trade places. But there are serious issues about national policy involved, and they have to be faced.

There are two seemingly separate elements in the current argument. One is about Washington leaks reflecting the bitter personal and policy feuds in the Administration. The other is about Central America and what is and is not valid information on which policy judgments should be made.

They are obviously related, since both problems involve the responsibility of the media to its own standards and to the public, and both affect what the U.S. can and will do in foreign affairs.

Washington leaks are an old story. Henry Kissinger used to say that information is power, and he was a master wielder. There are also amateur leakers, people whose aim is not so much to manipulate the daily course of events as to blow the whistle on abuse, deceit, wrong headedness that they have come to find intolerable and impossible to stop through government procedures.

Inevitably, some damage is done when normal channels are punctured in this way. The question then is the value of public exposure. The reporter's creed denies the right to set one's self above history as well as temporal powers and to judge what is good or not good for people to know. But it requires constant judgment on what is news.

It shouldn't be self-evident that any leak, when authenticated, deserves publication. Thus, I found distasteful the printing of a highly selective set of notes from Secretary of State Alexander Haig's staff meetings. There was no substantive news in it, just language more candid than diplomatic.

The only story was that in-fighting and disorder in Washington have reached a terrible state when a Government official high enough to attend staff meetings chooses to snipe se-

cretely with such a leak. But the story was only implied, not told.

Already, senior officials say, the revelations of recent years have led to reduced record-keeping. Some things just aren't put on paper.

Now, there is bound to be more care in talking at formal meetings. Such an atmosphere of suspicion makes the worst possible climate for the frank and sometimes forcefully dissenting exchange a decision-maker needs with his advisers. Bad communications make for bad government. It may be more fun to read how they actually talk, but it doesn't shed any light on policy.

The Washington Post report of a National Security Council decision for covert action in Nicaragua is an opposite example. That was important and useful news, evidently leaked to blow a whistle.

In part, the controversy about coverage of El Salvador is the same issue. Some of the stories reflect leaks from officials on the spot grown frustrated with seeing their reports to Washington distorted to make propaganda and justify previously decided policy. These are conscience leaks, of the greatest value because they are an attempt to prevent decisions based on bad information.

David Halberstam has recognized the clear parallel of his own experi-

ence with field officers in Vietnam. He explained the dilemma, both for the reporter and the official, with moving eloquence in a recent article in The Wall Street Journal. He also reminded how much is at stake when the people at the top begin to lie and manipulate to suit their views.

Another part of the argument about the press and Salvador came in a Wall Street Journal editorial attacking reporters for lending credence to guerrilla propaganda. This wasn't a problem in Vietnam because the U.S. press had virtually no access to the Vietcong.

But it is a result of Vietnam because there the press learned the hard way to detect the symptoms of official lies and distortions, and to notice that opposition propaganda can contain some facts just as our own does. It was a vital lesson.

The editorial pointed out that the fall of friendly regimes in Cambodia, China, Iran etc. didn't necessarily improve things in those countries, and it seemed to blame the reporters who exposed their failings. The fallacy is common. If one side has black hats, the other must be the white hats. But they can all be black, or gray. And friendly tyrants can fall of their own weight, damaging the U.S. in their debacle.

A reporter who tries to judge, or cover-up, is an irresponsible reporter, not one who tries to reflect the actual colors of the battlefield.

It is not, and must not be, the reporter's job to foresee the consequences of telling significant facts. That is trying to play God and stop history. Truth is the hardest substance in the world to pin down. But the one certainty is the awesome penalty exacted sooner or later from a society whose reporters stop trying.

Which side attracts your sympathies, where and how you get the information is not the crucial issue. If you're on the side of democracy, freedom, the fate of the U.S. and human decency, then you have to be on the side of chasing truth.